

crawled through the bodies of his siblings to find the warmth and nourishment of his mother.

THE COMEDIAN WITH THE BIG MOUTH

Ruth and Ellis had stage-side seats at the Club Chistoso, and the comedian chose Ellis to harass. He always picked on a bald, middle-aged man to make a fool of; they were so easy, and so much fun. He snatched Ellis' strawberry Margarita, in its high-stemmed, wide-mouthed glass, and held it up for the crowd to see: "This is what the real macho guys drink, folks. I mean, (to Ellis) what the hell is this? It's pink, for cryin' out loud. I mean, (to the audience) I bet the Vikings would quaff a few of these babies before goin' ashore and raping and plundering. What do you think?"

The audience roared with laughter.

The comedian returns to the embarrassed Ellis: "Mind if I try it, pal?"

Ellis, looking like he'd prefer to be sitting under the table, nods yes.

A long slimy tongue emerges from the comedian's mouth, like a thick pink snail's head, and dips down into the drink, all the way to the bottom of the glass. The audience lets out a disgusted, "OH!" The ladies squirm in their chairs. The comedian laps some of the fluid into his mouth, like a dog, then inserts the entire eight-inch-diameter rim of the glass into his mouth, stretching his rubbery lips into a big 'O.' And he tilts his head back.

The pink fluid disappears and the stem of the glass points skyward, like a miniature crystal antennae. The crowd giggled, then broke into gales of laughter as the comedian gargled, the pink fluid bubbling and splashing like a bloody, boiling hot spring. When he looked back down and popped the glass out of his mouth, he found himself face to face with Ellis' wife Ruth, a stocky fireplug of a woman in a Hawaiian print muu muu and a stiff blue bouffant. She says, "That drink cost two fifty, dude. Fork over or you're dead meat."

So what's the comedian think: he thinks management's playing a joke on him and, ever poised, he accuses the woman of being the heavyweight champion of the world, in drag. He found out that, for all intents and purposes, she might as well be.

A quick blur of punches dropped him to the stage. He pushed up onto his hands and knees and got one leg under himself, standing and beating the count. Ellis grabbed his wrists and wiped his fists on his shirt, saying, "You O.K.? You want me to stop it?"

The comedian takes a deep breath, looking across the stage at his opponent. "I'm O.K." he says. "Don't stop it. I can take her."

Ellis steps back and waves Ruth in. She shuffles forward, looking for an opening, and throws a murderous left to the liver. As the comedian crumbles, she hits him with a pile-driving right to the face. He goes down hard, his head bouncing off the stage, and lies on his back, unconscious, his left leg twitching with the confused impulses from his brain.

Ellis grabs Ruth's hand and raises it over her head. The crowd boos, and some of them throw their beer at the stage. Ruth starts for them, ready to take on the house, but Ellis holds her back. A chair flies through the air and lands at their feet, then more beer, and beer mugs. Ruth and Ellis crouch down and exit, stage right.

IN THE GARDEN

Clete lofted his horseshoe. It spun backwards as it arced toward the spike.

"All right, ringer," he yelled.

But it clanked off the metal pole, bouncing high, and sailed away across the lawn. It struck Ginger, his wife's little Chihuahua, and dropped her.

"Uh oh," said Ellis, Clete's next-door neighbor and regular horseshoe partner.

"Uh oh," said Clete. He ran to the dog and kneeled beside her, giving her a shake, saying, "Wake up, girl, wake up."

Ellis stood behind him, looking over his shoulder: "I think she's dead," he said.

Clete rubbed his face. "What'll we tell Juanita?"

"What'll you tell Juanita?" said Ellis, backing away toward the gate.